

NUMB. 17. TUESDAY, May 15, 1750.

— *Me non oracula certum,  
Sed mors certa facit.*

LUCAN.

Let those weak minds, who live in doubt and fear,  
To juggling priests for oracles repair ;  
One certain hour of death to each decreed,  
My fixt, my certain soul from doubt has freed. ROWE.

IT is recorded of some eastern monarch, that he kept an officer in his house, whose employment it was to remind him of his mortality, by calling out every morning, at a stated hour, *Remember, prince, that thou shalt die.* And the contemplation of the frailness and uncertainty of our present state appeared of so much importance to Solon of Athens, that he left this precept to future ages ; *Keep thine eye fixed upon the end of life.*

A frequent and attentive prospect of that moment, which must put a period to all our schemes, and deprive us of all our acquisitions, is indeed of the utmost efficacy to the just and rational regulation of our lives ; nor would ever any thing wicked, or often any thing absurd, be undertaken or prosecuted by him who should begin every day with a serious reflection that he is born to die.

The disturbers of our happiness, in this world, are our desires, our griefs, and our fears ; and to all these, the consideration of mortality is a certain and adequate remedy. Think, says Epictetus, frequently on poverty, banishment, and death,

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and thou wilt then never indulge violent desires, or give up thy heart to mean sentiments, *ἔτι μὲν ἐπὶ τῷ ταπεινῷ ἐνθυμησῶν, ἔτι ἄγαν ἐπὶ θυμῷ σείεις τινός.*

That the maxim of Epictetus is founded on just observation will easily be granted, when we reflect how that vehemence of eagerness after the common objects of pursuit is kindled in our minds. We represent to ourselves the pleasures of some future possession, and suffer our thoughts to dwell attentively upon it, till it has wholly engrossed the imagination, and permits us not to conceive any happiness but its attainment, or any misery but its loss; every other satisfaction which the bounty of Providence has scattered over life is neglected as inconsiderable, in comparison of the great object which we have placed before us, and is thrown from us as incumbering our activity, or trampled under foot as standing in our way.

Every man has experienced how much of this ardour has been remitted, when a sharp or tedious sickness has set death before his eyes. The extensive influence of greatness, the glitter of wealth, the praises of admirers, and the attendance of supplicants, have appeared vain and empty things, when the last hour seemed to be approaching; and the same appearance they would always have, if the same thought was always predominant. We should then find the absurdity of stretching out our arms incessantly to grasp that which we cannot keep, and wearing out our lives in endeavours to add new turrets to the fabrick of ambition, when the foundation itself is shaking, and the ground on which it stands is mouldering away.

All envy is proportionate to desire; we are uneasy at the attainments of another, according as we think

think our own happiness would be advanced by the addition of that which he withholds from us; and therefore whatever depresses immoderate wishes, will, at the same time, set the heart free from the corrosion of envy, and exempt us from that vice which is, above most others, tormenting to ourselves, hateful to the world, and productive of mean artifices and sordid projects. He that considers how soon he must close his life, will find nothing of so much importance as to close it well; and will, therefore, look with indifference upon whatever is useless to that purpose. Whoever reflects frequently upon the uncertainty of his own duration, will find out, that the state of others is not more permanent, and that what can confer nothing on himself very desirable, cannot so much improve the condition of a rival, as to make him much superior to those from whom he has carried the prize, a prize too mean to deserve a very obstinate opposition.

Even grief, that passion to which the virtuous and tender mind is particularly subject, will be obviated or alleviated, by the same thoughts. It will be obviated, if all the blessings of our condition are enjoyed with a constant sense of this uncertain tenure. If we remember, that whatever we possess is to be in our hands but a very little time, and that the little, which our most lively hopes can promise us, may be made less, by ten thousand accidents; we shall not much repine at a loss, of which we cannot estimate the value, but of which, though we are not able to tell the least amount, we know, with sufficient certainty, the greatest, and are convinced that the greatest is not much to be regretted.

But, if any passion has so much usurped our understanding, as not to suffer us to enjoy advantages with the moderation prescribed by reason, it is not too late to apply this remedy, when we find ourselves sinking under sorrow, and inclined to pine for that which is irrecoverably vanished. We may then usefully revolve the uncertainty of our own condition, and the folly of lamenting that from which, if it had staid a little longer, we should ourselves have been taken away.

With regard to the sharpest and most melting sorrow, that which arises from the loss of those whom we have loved with tenderness, it may be observed, that friendship between mortals can be contracted on no other terms, than that one must some time mourn for the other's death: And this grief will always yield to the survivor one consolation proportionate to his affliction; for the pain, whatever it be, that he himself feels, his friend has escaped.

Nor is fear, the most overbearing and resistless of all our passions, less to be tempered by this universal medicine of the mind. The frequent contemplation of death, as it shews the vanity of all human good, discovers likewise the lightness of all terrestrial evil, which certainly can last no longer than the subject upon which it acts; and according to the old observation, must be shorter, as it is more violent. The most cruel calamity which misfortune can produce, must, by the necessity of nature, be quickly at an end. The soul cannot long be held in prison, but will fly away, and leave a lifeless body to human malice.

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*Ridetque sui ludibria trunci.*

And soaring mocks the broken frame below.

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The utmost that we can threaten to one another is that death, which, indeed, we may precipitate, but cannot retard, and from which, therefore, it cannot become a wise man to buy a reprieve at the expence of virtue, since he knows not how small a portion of time he can purchase, but knows, that, whether short or long, it will be made less valuable by the remembrance of the price at which it has been obtained. He is sure that he destroys his happiness, but is not sure that he lengthens his life.

The known shortness of life, as it ought to moderate our passions, may likewise, with equal propriety, contract our designs. There is not time for the most forcible genius, and most active industry, to extend its effects beyond a certain sphere. To project the conquest of the world, is the madness of mighty princes; to hope for excellence in every science, has been the folly of literary heroes; and both have found at last, that they have panted for a height of eminence denied to humanity, and have lost many opportunities of making themselves useful and happy, by a vain ambition of obtaining a species of honour, which the eternal laws of Providence have placed beyond the reach of man.

The miscarriages of the great designs of princes are recorded in the histories of the world, but are of little use to the bulk of mankind, who seem very little interested in admonitions against errors which they cannot commit. But the fate of learned ambition is a proper subject for every scholar to consider; for who has not had occasion to regret the dissipation of great abilities in a boundless multiplicity of pursuits, to lament the sudden desertion of excellent designs, upon the offer of some other sub-

ject made inviting by its novelty, and to observe the inaccuracy and deficiencies of works left unfinished by too great an extension of the plan?

It is always pleasing to observe, how much more our minds can conceive than our bodies can perform; yet it is our duty, while we continue in this complicated state, to regulate one part of our composition by some regard to the other. We are not to indulge our corporeal appetites with pleasures that impair our intellectual vigour, nor gratify our minds with schemes which we know our lives must fail in attempting to execute. The uncertainty of our duration ought at once to set bounds to our designs, and add incitements to our industry; and when we find ourselves inclined either to immensity in our schemes, or sluggishness in our endeavours, we may either check, or animate, ourselves, by recollecting, with the father of physick, *that art is long, and life is short.*